

## ***Help Prevent Childhood Lead Poisoning: Local Projects That Can Help Make a Difference***

### **Childhood Lead Poisoning is a Serious Health Problem**

Lead poisoning remains the foremost preventable disease of childhood. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that 4.4% of our nation's preschoolers — 890,000 children — are affected. That's enough children to fill 35,000 classrooms.

Lead poisoning impairs our children's ability to learn and thrive. Even low-level lead poisoning can cause reductions in IQ and attention span, reading and learning disabilities, and growth and behavior problems. The effects of lead poisoning are long term and may be irreversible.

Childhood lead poisoning is a "silent epidemic." Children who suffer from low-level lead poisoning usually do not display obvious symptoms; it is difficult, if not impossible, to diagnose without a blood lead test; and, most poisoned children are never identified.

### **The Causes of Childhood Lead Poisoning are Clear**

New lead sources have been reduced significantly over the past two decades as nationwide bans on lead in gasoline, paint, drinking water, food cans, and other consumer products have taken effect. Today, almost all cases of lead poisoning occur when children are exposed to lead put in the environment years ago.

The principal source of lead poisoning today is lead dust from chipping and peeling lead-based paint, which is most common in pre-1950 buildings. Most lead hazards are caused by poor maintenance, paint deterioration, or improperly performed renovation, remodeling, and repainting projects. Children don't have to eat paint chips to be poisoned — lead-contaminated dust ingested through normal hand-to-mouth behavior of young children is the primary pathway of poisoning.

There are also other sources of lead in our environment (e.g., industrial sources, drinking water, soil, hobbies, etc.) that may contribute to children's lead exposure. These sources vary considerably by community.

### **We Can Prevent Childhood Lead Poisoning**

We now have the knowledge and the tools to protect all children from lead poisoning.

Protecting children from the principal source — lead-based paint and dust hazards in older homes — requires clear action steps. At a minimum, lead-based paint in older homes must be kept intact to prevent lead hazards. Education is needed to prevent routine repainting and remodeling projects from inadvertently poisoning children. And, a menu of other tools and strategies are readily available to combat additional sources of lead, as needed.

### **Prevention Requires Local Solutions**

Childhood lead poisoning can be found in all socioeconomic strata and all regions of the country, but the nature and severity of the lead poisoning problem varies greatly across the U.S. Thus, local lead poisoning prevention activities must be informed by a good understanding of the dimensions of the local problem and the resources that exist to combat

it. It is crystal clear that controlling lead hazards that already exist in children's homes and communities requires local commitment, local strategies, and local action.

### You Can Help Prevent Childhood Lead Poisoning

There are a host of projects that parents and community groups can undertake to protect children from lead poisoning. They range from policy initiatives requiring long-term commitments, to more discrete, targeted and short-term efforts. The following pages offer a sampling of projects for your consideration. This is just a short list of ideas to get you thinking.

Where they exist, you may be able to collaborate with and build on the efforts of established lead poisoning prevention advocacy organizations in your community. We urge you to contact the Alliance to get information and referrals to such groups in your area. State and local health departments and other government agencies also can be valuable sources of information, or even partners, to assist you with such projects. By working with such groups, your projects will have a head start by taking advantage of existing knowledge of the problems and available resources in your community.

### **Possible Lead Poisoning Prevention Projects for Your Group**

**Note:** Local projects often can be done most effectively in partnership with lead poisoning prevention advocacy organizations that exist in many locales. Please contact the Alliance to learn about such groups. Your local health department also may be able to help.

#### Education and Awareness Projects

Increasing general community awareness and knowledge about lead poisoning helps dispel common misconceptions (e.g., it's a problem of the past, only a few children living in extreme poverty are affected). Greater awareness can create a climate of support for community or governmental action for prevention. In addition, practical education about lead poisoning prevention to parents and other care-givers can directly benefit young children. Such education efforts often can be done in conjunction with agencies that provide other services to families with young children. *Lead is a Silent Hazard* (Walker Publishing Company, Inc., 1994) by Richard M. Stapleton is a good general primer on childhood lead poisoning. Projects to promote lead poisoning awareness and education are as varied as the potential audiences:

- **Develop a community-wide lead poisoning awareness program** using the news media, large community meetings and events, and mass-produced materials to widely disseminate basic information. Provide facts about the severity of lead's effects, the scope of the problem in your community, how children are exposed, and how it can be prevented.
- **Make presentations to smaller groups** at parenting classes, day care and pre-schools, schools, WIC programs, health clinics, churches, etc. Parents of young children can be reached wherever they congregate, and such presentations allow for more in-depth information to be provided. Model lead poisoning education curricula can be used or adapted for the needs of most audiences. For example, Montana State University Extension Service has one curriculum available online at <<http://www.montana.edu/wwwexair/leadmod.html>>. In addition, the National Lead Information Clearinghouse (202-293-2270, ext. 480) has a range of educational materials in a variety of media available at little or no cost. The federal pamphlet "Protect Your Family From Lead In Your Home" is a particularly useful tool that addresses the needs of families considering a

new home and those living in homes with lead-based paint. It is available from the Clearinghouse and a version without graphics is available on line at the U.S. EPA's website at <[http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/lead\\_pm/leadtxta.txt.html](http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/lead_pm/leadtxta.txt.html)>. Many health departments also have developed brochures and other tools customized for local use.

- Educate homeowners about safe repainting and remodeling. Team up with Home Depot, Lowe's, Sears or other hardware and paint stores to distribute information or hold a workshop on lead-safe work practices. An excellent pamphlet about lead-safe renovation is available from the Conservation Law Foundation of New England (617-350-0990).

### Testing Children for Lead Poisoning

Early identification of lead exposure through a simple blood test (screening) can make possible needed medical treatment and control of lead sources. Unfortunately, a large majority of children are never tested – and most lead poisoned children are never identified or given the help they need. Screening identifies lead poisoned children and provides information about the extent and concentration of lead poisonings in a community so that prevention efforts can be targeted. Local lead poisoning prevention advocacy groups, child health groups health departments, or medical organizations can assist with planning and carrying out screening events. And, for the first time, there is a new, hand-held screening device on the market that provides real-time lead levels, so the results can be provided on the spot.

- Organize a community screening. Screening events can be combined with prevention education. You'll need to recruit trained medical personnel, secure an appropriate site, publicize the event widely, and arrange for follow-up care and assistance for children identified with high lead levels. (You may also want to invite a reporter to attend.)
- Add lead screening to another community health screening effort, such as community health fairs or immunization drives. By piggy-backing lead screening onto larger health screening efforts, it may be possible to increase participation greatly and encourage others to include lead screening in future such events.

### Making Children's Homes Lead-Safe

The only way to prevent lead poisoning is to make sure children's environments are free of lead hazards ("lead-safe"). Controlling lead-based paint hazards can be dangerous and requires specialized knowledge and safety precautions. Approaches range from interim measures that reduce immediate exposure (e.g., regular cleaning to remove lead-contaminated dust, repairing water leaks and moisture problems that can cause paint to peel) to long-term measures to completely control all lead-based paint hazards. *Maintaining A Lead Safe Home* by Dennis Livingston (for copies, contact the author at 410-727-7837) is both a good, practical manual and a resource that can be used for conducting education. Groups, working with local lead poisoning prevention advocates, other non-profit community organizations, state and municipal health and housing agencies and the business sector (real estate, banks, etc.), could help build community capacity to identify and remedy lead hazards in a number of ways:

- Provide low-cost lead hazard control work. Enlist trained professionals or trained philanthropic community groups to provide free or low-cost lead hazard control work to needy families living in older homes. Possible partners include licensed lead inspectors, risk assessors and abatement contractors; local CLEARCorps teams (which presently exist in Baltimore, Minneapolis and Pittsburgh; contact Dr. James Price of CLEARCorps at 410-455-2493 for more information); or others who have lead-specific training.
- Assess lead hazards in homes in your community. Launch a campaign to evaluate targeted homes for lead hazards. Team up with a licensed inspector or risk assessor, or take samples of lead dust, paint, soil or water and send them to an environmental lab for

analysis. One such lab is the non-profit Clean Water Lead Testing, Inc. (704-251-6800). Also, METS Laboratories has a low cost consumer lead dust hazard testing kit (1-800-604-1995).

- **Train people** -- including homeowners, painters, remodelers, and building maintenance personnel -- how to work safely in dwellings containing lead-based paint. A new one-day course available at nominal cost from National Environmental Training Association (602-956-6099) teaches lead-safe practices for apartment maintenance workers. The State of Vermont has similar a three hour course on lead safe maintenance practices which could be adapted for use elsewhere (contact Karen Garbarino, 802-865-7786). Local health or housing agencies might be willing to cosponsor such courses.
- **Raise funds** to assist families and small property owners with the costs of safe lead hazard control. Creating a revolving loan or grant fund, or getting banks to offer special loans (which would give banks credit under the Community Reinvestment Act), could also help some property owners finance lead hazard control work.
- **Purchase equipment or materials** needed to check buildings for lead-based paint (e.g., X-ray fluorescence machines) or to perform lead hazard control work (e.g., HEPA vacuum cleaners, construction materials).
- **Provide temporary shelter** for families who need to be relocated into a lead-safe dwelling while lead hazard control work is performed in their homes.

#### **Advocacy to Protect Children At Risk**

If lead poisoning is preventable, why are so many children still being poisoned? The main reason is lack of political will to provide the resources needed to control lead sources throughout children's environments. We do not even provide sufficient public health resources to respond adequately to children identified with lead poisoning. There are many areas where work needs to be done in cooperation with other lead poisoning prevention advocates and the Alliance:

- **Promote stronger laws** at the state or local level. For example, such laws could require testing children at risk for lead poisoning, establish lead-safe standards for property maintenance, and set training and safety standards for lead-based paint professionals and contractors.
- **Press for enforcement of existing laws**, such as a federal law that requires sellers and landlords to give families educational material and available information about lead hazards at the time that pre-1978 properties are sold or rented. Work with local real estate and apartment groups to ensure that they know about and are following the law, and report violators to HUD and EPA. Another important law needing better enforcement is the requirement that young children enrolled in Medicaid be tested for lead poisoning. Investigate the policies and practices of your state's Medicaid agency and physicians and HMOs who provide care.
- **Seek more resources** for prevention programs. Lead poisoning usually gets far less attention and priority than is warranted by its high prevalence and severity. Make it clear to elected officials that there is significant public support for funding prevention efforts.
- **Build better programs** for lead poisoning prevention. Local health and housing agencies often struggle to address lead poisoning with very limited resources. Along with other stakeholders (lead poisoning prevention advocacy organizations, non-profit community groups, the real estate and housing industry, etc.), join forces with public agencies to identify and fill gaps in state or local prevention programs.

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